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**An exploration of how life events and the social environment  
affect food behaviours among New Zealand women**

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## Abstract

**Background.** Food plays a major role in our health. A poor diet is a contributing factor to many diseases, including obesity and its co-morbidities. The literature suggests that the social environment including social relationships, the media and other features of the social context in which one is born, drive food choices and behaviours. However, there is limited research available explicitly investigating how significant life events and factors within the social environment affect food behaviours among New Zealand women. Given the high prevalence of obesity in New Zealand, there is a concerning gap in the literature attending to the development of food behaviours that may help understand the high obesity prevalence.

**Aim.** The aim of this study is to explore how life events and social environments impact the food behaviours of New Zealand women.

**Methods.** This study is informed by phenomenology and used semi-structured interviews for data collection. Nineteen interviews with older women, who resided in Wellington, were carried out. The interviews asked questions regarding the experiences of these women and the development of their food behaviours overtime.

**Results.** Four main themes were identified, the effect of social relationships; the changing role of the media; gender roles; and social osmosis. The results revealed that the participants were highly influenced by social relationships, with the most influential relationships being between the participants and their mothers'. The media was found to play a role in influencing the participants to change their food behaviours. However, the media also caused widespread confusion about the nutrition guidelines. Gender norms appeared to guide the participants in the type of food related skills they learnt over their lifetime. The final theme, social osmosis describes how participants accumulated food-related information from their social environment over their lifetime that contributed to their food and total nutrition knowledge.

**Discussion.** As mothers increasingly join the workforce, children may need additional guidance on food related skills from social environments outside of

the home to make up for the reduced time mothers spend in the home carrying out roles dedicated to being a homemaker. In addition, there may need to be restrictions on the type of information published in mainstream media to avoid confusion about how to maintain a healthy diet. Overall, the social environment plays a crucial role in the development of food behaviours and the present study gives an indication of how it is influential for New Zealand women.

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